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Sergei Prokofiev's *Semyon Kotko* as a Representative Example of Socialist Realism

Sergei Prokofiev composed his first Soviet opera, *Semyon Kotko*, in 1939, shortly after returning permanently to Soviet Russia from Europe. The libretto was taken from Valentin Katayev's 1938 novel *Ya-sïn trudovogo naroda* («I am a Son of the Working People»), a tale about the German invasion of a Ukrainian village during the post-revolutionary Civil War. Its highly didactic prose, reliance on description, and simplistic treatment of metaphor are typical features of so-called socialist realism, the official artistic doctrine of the Stalinist regime. In this essay I will examine the extent to which Prokofiev's opera does not uphold the tenets of this doctrine. While the deployment of musical ideas in the score generally follows the thematic development of Katayev's text, thus substantiating its political message, in several passages it can be argued that the music and text have contradictory meanings. In what follows, I suggest that Prokofiev establishes an authorial presence within the opera, thus challenging the conventions of socialist realism.

Socialist Realism

Although it has some connection to nineteenth century critical realism, socialist realism is most often described as a form of banal populism. It emerged following the centralization and regimentation of the arts in the Soviet Union by Andrei Zhdanov, Stalin's cultural commissar. The strict censures placed on Soviet artists led to a marked decline in the quality of the genre, with the utopian aesthetic of early examples of socialist realist art transforming into «a materialized non-being»[1] in later examples. Hence, Abram Tertz writes that socialist realism came to contradict the underlying premises of its nineteenth-century antecedent:

> A socialist, i.e., a purposeful, a religious, art cannot be produced with the literary method of the nineteenth century called «realism». And a really faithful representation of life cannot be achieved in a language based on teleological concepts.[2]

In several respects, the content of socialist realist prose has more in common with eighteenth-century sentimentalist writing than with nineteenth-century realism. Like socialist realism, sentimentalist prose typically features heroes with positive outlooks, high intelligence and fine manners. They are identified by what Gitta Hammarberg calls an aesthetic «pleasure principle»[3], a strong sense of virtue and an ability to detect the presence of evil — most often within their own consciences. The storylines express faith in the Rationalist world view and often address the question of whether the «moral sentiments» of the individual agree or disagree with the «traditional precepts of Christian morality»[4]. Such faith — grounded in Rationalist philosophy — was adopted and modified by the practitioners of socialist realism into a steadfast belief in the Revolutionary Purpose.

The Absence of a Narrator

The text Prokofiev chose for his first Soviet opera, Katayev's novel, expresses several features of the sentimentalist style. The hero, Semyon Kotko, is a World War I veteran released from duty following the Bolshevik overthrow of Russia's and Ukraine's provisional government. The villain, Tkachenko, is an embittered *kulak* who conspires with the Germans and other counter-revolutionaries to win back his former estate. Central to the plot is the tangled love affair between Semyon and Sof'ya, who happens to be Tkachenko's daughter, and that between Mikola, an army cadet, and Frosya, Semyon's mischievous younger sister.

As Prokofiev himself observed, Katayev's tale is comprised of simple oppositions — the «love of the young people, the hatred of the representatives of the old world, the heroism of struggle, mourning for the dead and the rich humor characteristic of the Ukrainian people».[5] Katayev's *narodnost'* (or *folk-ness*) is revealed in the extravagant descriptions of village customs (Semyon and Sof'ya's matchmaking ceremony, their engagement party, and the rough equivalent of a housewarming party), and in the contrast of the villagers' dialect with the elevated (but morally impoverished) speech of the counter-revolutionaries.[6] Though the novel's characters lack

1 Alexander Ivashkin, «Post October Soviet Art: Canon and Symbol», in: *Musical Quarterly* 74 (1990) 2, pp. 303-304.

2 Abram Tertz, «On Socialist Realism», translated by George Dennis, in: *The Trial Begins and On Socialist Realism*, Berkeley: University of California Press, 1982, p. 215.

3 Gitta Hammarberg, *From the idyll to the novel: Karamzin's sentimentalist prose*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991, pp. 7-8.

4 Ibid, p. 5.

5 Sergei Prokofiev, «Semyon Kotko», translated by Rose Prokofieva, in: *Materials, Articles, Interviews*, Moscow: Progress Publishers, 1978, p. 36.

6 Roland Barthes notes that such defining contrasts are manifest in the syntax of socialist realist prose. See his *Writing Degree Zero*, translated by Annette Lavers and Colin Smith, New York: Noonday Press, 1968, p. 24.

the elegance and refinement of their eighteenth-century counterparts, they nevertheless retain their ideals. As Tertz notes:

> If they [these characters] are sometimes lacking in taste, this is the national and social trait of our classicism, born as it was of Russian democracy. But neither the heroes nor their authors ever suspect that they are in bad taste. They try with all their power to be beautiful, polite, and cultured.[7]

There is, however, a significant difference between sentimentalist prose and socialist realism, one that has nothing to do with the class distinction between aristocratic and peasant heroes, or with language, plot, and setting. It resides rather in the more abstract realm of the positioning of the narrative voice and in the creation of an authoriality. The narrator of a sentimentalist tale possesses what can be called an ‹independent› voice, an ability to posit opinions and sympathize with the various characters. Most importantly, he addresses the reader directly as part of what Hammarberg calls the «topic message» of the work:

> The essence of Sentimentalist solipsism resides precisely in the fact that author, reader, the act of authorship, and the communicative event, are made part of the topic of the works, in other words, that a narrator utterance is strongly featured.[8]

Sentimentalist narration thus demonstrates the «transformation» of the author into an «author-as-personage»[9], represented by the voice of the narrator. The intimacy consequently established between the «author-as-personage» and the reader serves two functions: it foregrounds the act of writing, making the reader conscious of this ‹author› who is also the fictional narrator; in this, it also destabilizes the text by blatantly fictionalizing what the reader could otherwise perceive to be real. Because narrative speech so constantly refers to itself, calls attention to itself, the figure of the author is as if at the centre of many mirrors: he is magnified, affirmed in his authoriality, yet also made into a fiction.

In a novel of socialist realism, however, the narrator reports the speech and actions of the protagonists without evaluating them through independent commentary. The reporting function is «unmarked» — to use Roman Jakobson's term. This lacuna in part explains the emphasis on description over psychological development in Katayev's novel. The detachment, or withdrawal of the narrator marks the work as both a model example of socialist realism and (to a lesser extent) a variation of nineteenth-century realism. An image of the author in the guise of a narrator could possibly subvert the doctrine, as its validity depends on the replication from text to text of predetermined aesthetic criteria. The governing force of Katayev's novel is instead anonymous and communal, «a materialized non-being».

The Presence of a Narrator

Katayev's novel initially appealed to Prokofiev as the subject for an opera because it conformed to socialist realist doctrine. Mindful of the critical and commercial failures of the three operas he composed in the West (a major motivation for his return to Russia), he sought a text with the kind of bland populist appeal that would ensure success with the Soviet cultural bureaucracy.

Prokofiev wrote the opera's libretto in collaboration with Katayev, but for advice in setting it to music he turned to the avant-garde theater director Vsevolod Meyerhold, who worked with the composer on *The Gambler* (1916/1928) and *The Love for Three Oranges* (1921). While Prokofiev was willing to base the opera on a text that reflected «the new conditions»[10], he was at first unwilling to compromise his musical style, hoping to compose the new work using continuous declamation. Katayev — more politically astute than either Meyerhold or Prokofiev — encouraged the composer to include «lots of arias, folk songs and choruses». He was dismayed when Prokofiev told him that there «won't be any arias, there won't be any verses — your prose text as it stands will be entirely satisfactory». [11]

Prokofiev derived his ideas about operatic dramaturgy from two relatively obscure works of the 1860's — Modest Musorgsky's *Marriage* and Alexander Dargomïzhsky's *The Stone Guest*. These operas, familiar to Prokofiev from his student days at the St. Petersburg Conservatory, make minimal use of leitmotifs and contain no set pieces. The melodic lines are instead dictated by the speech patterns (the actual intonation of the words) of the characters, with emphasis on the preservation of accents and stresses idiomatic to the Russian language. Prokofiev believed that this practice allowed Musorgsky and Dargomïzhsky to capture emotional subtleties otherwise lost in conventional dramaturgy. He used a loose variant of it — what has been called «melodic mould» technique[12] — in both *The Gambler* and *The Love for Three Oranges*.

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7 Tertz, «On Socialist Realism», pp. 208-9.

8 Hammarberg, *From the idyll to the novel*, p. 25.

9 Ibid, p. 23.

10 Sergei Prokofiev, «Semyon Kotko», p. 36.

11 As cited by Harlow Robinson, «Love for Three Operas: The collaboration of Vsevolod Meyerhold and Sergei Prokofiev», *The Russian Review* 45 (1986), p. 302.

12 Richard Taruskin, «Tone, Style, and Form in Prokofiev's Soviet Operas: Some Preliminary Observations», in: *Studies in the History of Music, Vol. 2: Music and Drama*, edited by Gerald Abraham, New York: Broude Brothers Ltd., 1988, p. 219. My description of the dramaturgical structure of *Semyon Kotko* is largely derived from this important study.

Although the declamatory style predominates in *Semyon Kotko*, it is clear that Prokofiev heeded Katayev's plea for greater lyricism. As Richard Taruskin explains:

> [...] ‹classicalizing› modifications in Prokofiev's style include the introduction of a limited number of vocal set pieces, the incorporation of elements of genre both in the form of ‹interpolated› numbers and as a more generalized stylistic influence, and a noticeable effort to ‹lyricalize› the opera — all, it should be emphasized,within a continuing reliance on through-composed prose declamation as basic dramatic medium and provider of continuity.[13]

Taruskin asserts that the bulk of the stylistic changes reflect Prokofiev's determination to avoid (yet another) operatic failure, but the composer clearly felt a pressure to comply with Soviet cultural policy for reasons beyond careerism. Meyerhold, the director of the production, was arrested in June 1939 for his failure to reform the «esoteric nature» of his stage works, and for a speech delivered to the All-Union Congress of Directors, in which he called socialist realist theatre «a pitiful and wretched thing».[14] He was replaced by the actress and novice director Serafima Birman. Fear of a similar fate is evident in the statement Prokofiev issued for a planned collection of writings on *Semyon Kotko*. Instead of promoting spoken declamation as a substitute for the «boring conventionalities» of opera, as he had in the West, he now spoke of recitative as the «least interesting element».[15]

Semyon Kotko is thus not an overtly subversive work (how could it be?), but in several passages the music undermines, or ‹disrupts› the monological narrative structure of Katayev's text. One might argue that Prokofiev in effect duplicates in music the subtle reflexivities of the garrulous, self-promoting narrator of sentimentalist prose. He creates a fictional, self-conscious composer — the musical equivalent of an «author-as-personage» — within the score. Anathema to socialist realism, the presence of this musical author has the distancing effect that informs us that the opera's plot is a construct, a fantasy with no link to reality. To use Hammarberg's terminology, Prokofiev makes «artistic creation itself [...] part of his created world».[16] We will test this assessment by examining the music of two characters: Mikola and Tkachenko.

Mikola

Mikola, an army cadet, is Semyon Kotko's younger double — he both admires and imitates the older soldier. His teenage love affair with Frosya, Semyon's younger sister, parallels that between Semyon and Sof'ya. As the plot unfolds, Mikola's role increases in importance: in Act II, he steals a pair of rifles from some German soldiers and warns his friends about Tkachenko's plans to overthrow the village *Soviet*; in Act III, he conspires with Semyon to murder a German sentry. Both he and Semyon are later captured by Tkachenko, but escape to participate in the final liberation of the village.

In the course of the action Mikola assumes many of Semyon's musical features. The change is evident in the deployment of musical motives, which shift from the «lyric comic» style associated with secondary characters to the «lyric dramatic» style of the protagonists.[17] The «shy and carefree» music accompanying Mikola's Act I entrance becomes increasingly «heartfelt and psychologically expressive», moving from major to minor. Moreover, in Act III Prokofiev transfers the second strain of Semyon's principal motive — the «theme of return» — to Mikola's part, thereby intimating that their fates have become bound up together. Since Mikola acts as a catalyst in advancing the plot, the exchange also suggests that he has replaced Semyon as the story's hero.

There is another, more significant musical exchange in the fifth scene of Act III. Here, Mikola sings a variation of the Ukrainian folk song «Rano-ranen'ko» («Early, So Early») while accompanying himself on the guitar. The tune is familiar to us from the opera's brief overture, where it serves as a kind of symbol for Ukrainian peasant life. (It is also used in the «Nocturne» of Act II and in Semyon and Sof'ya's love duet of Act III.) Prokofiev subtly alters Mikola's version to accommodate the chromatic figure assigned to Tkachenko's co-conspirator, Klembovsky. The musical message is simple and predictable: the counter-revolutionaries will change village life (undoubtedly) for the worse.

At this point in the plot, however, Mikola has no clue that the Germans will invade — the ominous message is intended solely for the audience. In essence, this musical device establishes the voice of a musical author, an «author-as-personage» who communicates in music. And the alteration of the folk song creates a kind of polyphony, or a musical double-exposure: on one level, Mikola is singing, yet on another, this musical author is singing a commentary through the sound of Mikola's voice. Mikola becomes a two-way mirror between the musical author and Semyon, reflecting one, then the other. Akin to the devices which establish the solipsistic narrator of a sentimentalist tale, Mikola's version of the song attests to the musical author's commentary on — and distance from — the drama.

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13 Ibid, pp. 224-5.

14 From Juri Jegalin's stenographic record of the speech, as cited by James Symons, *Meyerhold's Theatre of the Grotesque*, Coral Gables: University of Miami Press, 1971, p. 192.

15 Sergei Prokofiev, «Semyon Kotko», p. 37.

16 Hammarberg, *From the idyll to the novel*, p. 20.

17 These and other quotes in the paragraph are taken from Marina Sabinina's «*Semyon Kotko*» *i problemï opernoy dramaturgii Prokof'eva*, Moscow: Sovetskiy kompozitor, 1963, pp. 178-9.

Of course, other composers comment on their characters in similar ways, but the musical mirrorings in this opera have the peculiar effect of diminishing the stature of the «positive» hero. We sense that Semyon is merely a projection of an ideal, a sentimental image which the musical author has the other characters usurp. Later events in the opera substantiate this point: the «cheerful and buoyant»[18] melody Semyon sings during the Act IV «artillery lesson», for instance, is subsequently sung back to Semyon by Remenyuk, the chief of the village *Soviet*, after helping him escape from the Germans. Here, the musical author is again projected into a polyphonic utterance with a character. We see that the repetition of a given theme may either «contradict or affirm» the meaning of prior presentations, attesting to the dialogicity of the work[19], and, in musical form, provides a sense of distance from a plot revealed as fiction.

Tkachenko

At other points in the opera the repetition of musical material explicitly distorts the central message of the source text — that of the triumph of socialism. As noted, Katayev clearly distinguishes hero from villain in his novel. Although this distinction is retained in the opera's vocal parts — as Taruskin writes, «positive characters sing, villains declaim»[20] — it is not always retained in the orchestral accompaniment. With respect to Tkachenko, this ambiguity serves to emphasize the tragedy of the military conflict over the final defeat of the Germans, a feature of the dramaturgical plan that disturbed Soviet opera critics.[21]

Prior to the scene in which Tkachenko learns of Sof'ya's plans to marry Semyon, the orchestra introduces his principal theme. Instead of the dissonant march-like music of the counter-revolutionaries, we hear the kind of lyrical tune commonly associated with Semyon and the partisans. The open fifths, doubled octaves, and descending eighth-note patterns of the theme all recall Semyon's «theme of return». The similarity leads Marina Sabinina to describe Tkachenko's music as untypical of the «tradition ingrained in Soviet opera [for portraying villains]».[22] Concerning Tkachenko's second theme, she adds:

> [It] more clearly displays his tie to song, specifically Ukrainian folk song. Curiously, it first appears just when he reveals himself to be a deceitful informer, treacherous and cruel.[23]

As with Mikola's music, the curious sameness of the folk-like music assigned to Tkachenko and Semyon can be understood as a commentary on the part of Prokofiev's constructed musical author. While the libretto attests to the opposition of good and evil, hero and villain, the score suggests that such oppositions are superficial, fictional. As Tertz puts it:

> The enemy [in a socialist realist novel] was like the positive hero — clear, straightforward, and, in his own way, purposeful. Only his significance was negative — to hinder the movement to the Purpose.[24]

Prokofiev's moralizing, sentimentalizing musical author reveals the common and tragic circumstances that drew the characters into conflict. These concern the past relationship between Semyon and Tkachenko, who served together during World War I, a story told in the novel but excluded from the libretto; they also pertain to the «Romeo-and-Juliet-like»[25] love between Semyon and Sof'ya, Tkachenko's daughter, which inevitably brings the two warring households together. These hidden narratives undermine the Soviet dramaturgical principle that the triumph of socialism must overshadow personal tragedy. The result is a negation of the truth value of the opera's plot.

In the end, with respect to the overall style and the musical depiction of certain characters in *Semyon Kotko*, it can be argued that Prokofiev resists the conventions of Soviet operatic dramaturgy: the music undermines the text, and meanings go astray. The composer evidently convinced himself that it was possible to retain features of his past style within what he wryly termed «new conditions». Although in later years he was coerced into almost complete submission by an uncompromising political system, in *Semyon Kotko* we find the markers of an independent authorial voice. This voice supplants the governing force, the «materialized non-being» of socialist realist doctrine.

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18 Sabinina, *«Semyon Kotko»*, p. 206.

19 See Hammarberg, *From the idyll to the novel*, pp. 15-16.

20 Taruskin, «Tone, Style, and Form in Prokofiev's Soviet Operas», p. 225.

21 See, for example, Izrail Nest'ev, «*Semyon Kotko* S. Prokof'eva», *Sovetskaya muzïka* 9 (1940), pp. 7-30; and Ivan Sollertinsky «Dramaturgiya opernogo libretto», in: *Sovetskaya muzïka* 3 (1941), pp. 21-31.

22 Sabinina, *Semyon Kotko*, p. 153.

23 Ibid, p. 155.

24 Tertz, «On Socialist Realism», p. 190.

25 Richard Taruskin, «Semyon Kotko», in: *The New Grove Dictionary of Opera*, Volume 4, edited by Stanley Sadie, London: Macmillan Press Ltd., 1992, p. 312.